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Journalists kidnapped, jailed, killed in 23 nations

By Tracy Wilkinson

Latin editors criticize U.S. counterparts for "idealizing" leftist guerilla movements

Journalists have been kidnapped, jailed, wounded or killed in Argentina, Grenada, Chile, Haiti, Guatemala and El Salvador, the Inter American Press Association was told during its annual meeting in Lima, Peru, last week.

U.S. and Latin American newspaper publishers and editors said journalists were arrested, harassed, muzzled or subjected to other violations of press liberties in 23 Western Hemisphere nations in the past year.

"Attacks against freedom of the press are coming with more frequency and with greater rage," Andres Garcia Lavin, Inter American Press Association president, told the opening of the group's 39th annual general assembly.

Garcia Lavin said the IAPA sent protests to 23 nations over the last year, over abuses of freedom of the press. They cited governments of Nicaragua, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and El Salvador.

The IAPA had earlier warned of erosion of freedom of the press in the United States, citing a "continued campaign" by the Reagan administration to censor government information.

The IAPA said Reagan was abusing his power by changing FBI and CIA guidelines to allow those agencies to infiltrate the news media.

Some 375 members of the IAPA met in Peru to study the gains and losses in press freedom throughout the Americas.

"This is a dangerous profession and our protection must be an international issue," said IAPA representative Edward Seaton of Seaton Newspapers in Manhattan, Kansas.

The IAPA accused the Nicaraguan government of imposing drastic censorship and invoking death threats against the newspaper *La Prensa* from publishing a significant amount of news — sometimes as much as 90% of its material.

Arbitrary "national security" laws muzzle the press in many countries, the press group said.

In Uruguay, six magazines were shut down by the military government this year — one because it published a photograph of Spanish King Juan Carlos with a Uruguayan opposition leader.

The IAPA also criticized the emergence of journalism profession societies in many Latin American nations. Membership often is mandatory or a reporter is not allowed to work in the country.

All but two of the 20 U.S. and Latin journalists killed in the last year died in South America, including eight Peruvian reporters slaughtered in a remote Andean village last January.

"This is a dangerous profession and our protection must be an international issue," said IAPA representative Edward Seaton of Seaton Newspapers in Manhattan, Kansas.

Panelists James Nelson Goodsell of the *Christian Science Monitor* and Associated Press Mexico editor Peter Eisner said the dangers are inherent in the job.

"There may be no way we can guarantee our own safety," Eisner said.

James Brooke, South American correspondent for the *Miami Herald*, recommended caution.

"In the print business you don't have to watch them pull the trigger," he said. "It's an unnecessary risk and rarely adds anything to the story."

The panelists warned some efforts to guarantee safety might backfire and be abused by governments to justify licensing, surveillance and other restrictions.

The IAPA annual meeting was held under extraordinary security measures to prevent leftist guerilla attacks.

About 100 riot police armed with machine guns and flanked by armored cars and a small tank were stationed in front of the downtown hotel where the convention is taking place.

Plainclothes detectives stalked the floor where the main meeting was being held. Other security officers were stationed on the other 18 floors.

On the night of the first IAPA delegates' arrival, guerillas staged a dynamite and machine-gun attack on the Peruvian government's political party headquarters around the corner from the hotel.

During one panel debate, Latin American newspaper editors scolded their U.S. counterparts, saying they idealized leftist guerilla movements and provided shallow coverage of the region.

A group of Latin American editors questioned Sterling E. Soderlind, vice president for planning of the *Wall Street Journal;* William J. Small, president of United Press International; Warren Hoge, foreign editor of the *New York Times;* and William Long, chief of correspondents for the Miami Herald.

The questioners accused the U.S. press of romanticizing the 1979 leftist Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua and said the same prejudices tend to carry over in coverage of guerrilla movements in El Salvador and elsewhere.

Soderlind acknowledged that U.S. reporters and their readers often favor the underdog and see rebels as "Robin Hoods," but said careful editing should correct any hint of favoritism.

The panelists said it is incumbent on governments to counter pro-rebel favoritism with accurate information — not propaganda.

"It takes awhile for the press to become sophisticated (in recognizing political movements), while the guerillas have become very sophisticated in manipulating the news media," Small said.

"Governments should present their case in an open way. Too often the reporter goes to hear the other side and finds silence, not information."

Long added: "A government can't fight propaganda with more propaganda and disinformation."

The Hispanic representatives criticized the failure of the U.S. press to "ask why" in Latin America, the attaching of easy labels to ideologies, a tendency to superficially size up the region's events and "fireman journalism" — only showing interest in coups, earthquakes and other disasters.

Hoge said that while much of the criticism may have been justified 10 years ago, the U.S. media is improving its coverage of Latin America.

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